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**Dialogues in solitude: the discursive structures and social
functions of male toilet graffiti**

by

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Dialogues in solitude: the discursive structures and social functions of male toilet graffiti¹

Abstract

This paper looks at the discursive and interactional structures to be found in male toilet graffiti at a British university. Traditionally, toilet graffiti has been discussed in terms of thematic content and the possible psychological and socio-anthropological impacts on it. By contrast, this study draws on work in conversation analysis and discourse studies to investigate patterns of interaction in this form of mediated linguistic interaction. Combining pragmatics and conversation analysis, the paper identifies patterns of turn-taking, most notably adjacency pairs, and discusses the notion of face-threatening acts in graffiti. The genre is seen as hybrid, incorporating both spoken and written features, and as located in three contexts: the micro-context of the physical location, the meso-context of social relations at the institution and the macro-context of the wider social formation. All three contexts impact on the structures and the function of male toilet graffiti in that social actors enact conflicting group values while at the same time reinstantiating hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: conversation analysis, community of practice, graffiti, language and masculinity

Introduction

The word graffiti literally means ‘little scratchings’, from the Italian verb ‘graffiare’ meaning ‘to scratch’ (McCormick 2005: 3), and indeed a majority of

the first known collection of graffiti was scratched onto glass (see Thrumbo 1731). However, technological advances have led to an increase in the number of writing implements suited to this purpose and as a result, the 21st century allows individuals who may not possess diamonds (as were used in the 18th century), to write on almost any surface. Because of this, graffiti provides the discourse analyst with extensive and varied data. Indeed, the data collected for this study proved to be so rich that they could be discussed in terms of conversation/discourse analysis, pragmatics, language and gender, or literacy practices. We eventually decided to focus on conversation and discourse analysis, drawing on other aspects if they seemed particularly salient in the data samples.

The most prototypical form of graffiti might be the ‘urban territorial marker’ type (see Ley and Cybriwsky 1974, Modan 2006). This kind of graffiti mostly involves ‘tagging’, i.e. the ubiquitous application of the sprayer’s personal signature. Tagging is used to delineate turf and often seen in urban areas, for example in bus shelters. The functions of graffiti as a practice in hip-hop culture include spatial organisation and (group) identity construction, and ‘socioblinguistics’ (Pennycook 2006) has explored the phenomenon for a number of cultural contexts such as Australia (Pennycook 2006), Brazil (Pardue 2005), France (Milon 1999) and Germany (Christen 2003, van Treeck and Todt 1995). While urban graffiti clusters in particular areas, it is still dispersed across the cityscape. Inside a toilet, by contrast, space restrictions lead to texts that have to combine as many words as necessary to convey their message within minimal space. Such text is not simply marking territory, but also reveals the strategies that two or more participants who lack co-presence use to communicate, as well as aspects of the social connections between, and mutual perceptions of, individuals.

The aims of this study are twofold: From a textual perspective, it defines discourse as a unit of textual interaction above the sentence level (cf. Stubbs 1983). Starting from that definition, we attempt to ascertain the discursive structures of male toilet graffiti and to account for them by drawing on mainly conversation analysis. Focusing on the text producers, the paper further addresses the social function of male toilet graffiti in enacting conflict between group values as well as reinforcing notions of masculinity within a community of practice. The two aspects are seen as related in that the functions are realised in, and impact on, particular forms. The study thus seeks to contribute to the fields of discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, especially the study of language and masculinity (Johnson and Meinhof 1997).

To this end, we will present and discuss previous research that has been conducted on toilet graffiti, and introduce an approach that integrates the analysis of discursive structures with that of social context. Following this, we will elaborate on the methods of data collection, categorisation and analysis. Results will be discussed relative to the main discursive structures ascertained in the data, as well as the influence of social context on them. The paper will close by summarising what the results indicate for the study of discourse, and language and gender.

Writing in toilets: contexts and communities

Toilet graffiti — alternatively referred to as ‘latrinalia’ (Dundes 1966), ‘restroom graffiti’ (Alexander 1978) and even ‘shit house discourse’ (Omoniyi 2000) — has received attention from a number of disciplines, most notably psychology and social anthropology. However, there have been very few recent studies that have

used conversation/discourse analysis in an attempt to further our understanding of this area of language use. Still, an integrated discussion of the phenomenon requires the researcher to look at the textual level, i.e. the patterns of, and influences on, discourse structure, just as much as at the micro-context (location of text production and reception), the meso-level of social relations in an institution, and the socio-cultural macro-context of graffiti. An investigation of these aspects helps shed light on why and how people engage in graffiti writing.

Psychological and socio-anthropological accounts

The thematic content of toilet graffiti seems to have remained relatively constant since the earliest known collection of toilet graffiti published under the pseudonym Hurlo Thrumbo (1731), who states in his introduction to the ‘Glass Window and Bog House Miscellany’:

‘The original manuscripts [...] relating to Love, Matrimony, Drunkenness, Sobriety, Ranting, Scandal, Politicks, Gaming, and many other subjects, serious and comical.’

More recent studies have outlined similar themes; Stocker et al. (1972) for example used a framework for their data which split categories into four super-ordinates: *Homosexual*, *Heterosexual*, *Non-Sexual* and *Racist*, with sub-divisions including ‘drawings of genitalia’, ‘invitations or requests’, ‘love statements’, and ‘accusations of others’ behaviour’. While more abstract than Thrumbo’s taxonomy, the framework still seems haphazard, begging the question what ‘non-sexual’ would include, if ‘homophobic’ and ‘sexist’ are — wrongly — subsumed

under 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual', respectively, and how overlaps between categories are accounted for.

Psychological accounts (e.g. Dundes 1966) have drawn on Freudian theory in an attempt to explain why some topics remain relatively constant across time, especially those of excrement and defecation. Attempting a psychological explanation, Dundes (1966: 93 and 102) has drawn attention to the thematic content of male restroom graffiti showing a stronger preoccupation with faeces than female restroom graffiti. However, the higher frequency of these topics in male toilets could also be a reflection of female text producers having internalised the social ideal of 'polite' femininity (on gender difference in toilet graffiti, see also Bruner and Kelso 1980, Cole 1991, Green 2003, Moonwomon 1992, Reich et al. 1977, Wales and Brewer 1976). Also, psychological explanations do not account for why some of these common topics occur in higher frequencies in some male toilets than in others. In an attempt to explain this, other quantitative studies have attempted to incorporate the influence of alternative 'causal factors' (Stocker et al. 1972: 365), specifically focusing on the relationship between social context and the frequencies of different themes, with Lomas and Weltman (1966: 5, quoted in Stocker et al 1972: 356) claiming that graffiti reflect 'shared attitudes and values as well as ethnocentric variations on main cultural themes'. Data from differing social milieux may indeed illustrate different cultural preoccupations (relative frequency of utterances relating to politics, sex, race etc.). There is an assumption in much of the literature that social attitudes changing over time impact on thematic content, rendering graffiti dynamic:

‘The lifespan of graffiti expressive of a certain value is determined by the changing normative structure of the surrounding social milieu’ (Gonos et al. 1976: 48).

Many investigations have used categories similar to those of Stocker et al. (1972) to investigate whether or not the thematic content of graffiti ‘reflects areas of conflict or preoccupations of the general public’ (Wales and Brewer 1976), i.e. the social macro-context. Nwoye (1993: 423) found that at the University of Benin in Nigeria, 48.09 per cent of graffiti was political, as compared to quantitative studies carried out in other Commonwealth countries that have given figures on politics in male toilet graffiti as 9.3 per cent (Green 2003: 289); 4 per cent (Sechrest and Flores 1969: 7), 15.7 per cent (Stocker et al. 1972: 360-361) and — perhaps most accurately comparable to Nwoye’s study — , 15 per cent (Otta 1993: 590). The different frequencies of politics as a topic in graffiti across countries may be a reflection of people or groups being denied avenues of *public* expression (Nwoye 1993: 417). Similarly, many quantitative investigations into toilet graffiti have attempted to analyse graffiti with a view to establishing how it indicates marginalised sexual orientations and attitudes towards homosexuality (see Cole 1991; Gonos et al 1976; Leap 1997; Sechrest and Flores 1969, Solomon and Yager 1975, Stocker et al. 1972).

However, comparing studies in this way raises a number of complex methodological problems; for example the time that elapsed between studies into toilet graffiti means that true comparison between any two studies is difficult, given the changing social context. The location in which the graffiti were collected also differs; not only were the data gathered in different countries, but

some graffiti was collected in toilets in different institutions, such as restaurants or bars (see Sechrest and Flores 1969), a factor that does have an effect on the graffiti that one finds: as Omoniyi (2000: 3) discusses, there are differences between *town* graffiti and *university* graffiti ('gown'), and as such no two studies are directly comparable. University-specific forms for example feature intertextual references to Shakespeare:

Data sample 1

B (A) RH E-9²

[^A Prick me, do I not bleed,

Poison me, do I not die,

Cover up my graffiti.....

Will I not seek my revenge?] {cf. Merchant of Venice}

Data sample 2

B (A) RH I-3

[^A to pee or not to pee...] {cf. Hamlet}

Rather than just looking at thematic content, recent studies have studied graffiti in terms of communication (Rodriguez and Clair 1999; Omoniyi 2000). These are most relevant to the present study as they conceive graffiti not as separate thematic units but as discourse, i.e. as a unit of textual interaction above sentence level.

Linguistic accounts

Rodriguez and Clair's (1999) was one of the first studies to investigate graffiti in terms of the extent to which one can effectively communicate through this medium. Their focus was on the macro-level social context and its influence on the dialogue between marginalised groups, discussing the utterances in terms of linguistic features and how they serve to construct individual and group identity. Such an approach differs greatly from many of the earlier studies that simply assumed certain preoccupations or themes to signal certain cultural ideologies. Similarly, the present study attempts to outline contextual factors of text production and reception and their influence on the structure and form of graffiti found in male university toilets. In this, it hopes to show how there are shared attitudes and values that exist in multiple groups, i.e. 'communities of ideology' (Fowler 1985: 66). A further aspect is the function of male toilet graffiti to re-instantiate notions of masculinity. Not only are we dealing with an all-male group of text producers, but male toilets are also — and possibly to a larger extent than their female counterparts — sites of sexual practices like masturbation. Although enacted solitarily, such practices, and the shared knowledge about them, provide further group cohesion. A parallel point can be made for the function of male toilets as spaces for cottaging, i.e. anonymous gay sex, which enacts an aspect of gay masculinity. It therefore stands to reason that masculine identities and sexualities should be reflected and reinforced in male toilet graffiti.

Although researchers have discussed the anonymity afforded by the physical micro-context, i.e. the toilet cubicle (Dundes 1966; Solomon and Yager 1975), these studies have failed to account for the extent to which other factors influence the form and structure that language takes on the toilet wall. The only study to

critically discuss how micro and macro-context affects what participants write in this medium is that by Omoniyi (2000), who points out how in the toilet stall there are both monologic and dialogic discourse types and that these discourses in turn reflect group identities. Perhaps the first study to recognise the parallels of graffiti with spoken language was that by Bruner and Kelso (1980: 240-241), who described toilet graffiti as a 'silent conversation among anonymous partners'. This anonymity is something that directly results from the micro-context, a factor that has significant implications when considering the data.

Omoniyi (2000: 6) states that in toilet graffiti the discourse participants lack co-presence. As a result, we might not want to think of male toilet graffiti in terms of a conversation per se, but as 'mediated discourse' (Scollon 1998: 28). Omoniyi (ibid.) goes on to compare toilet graffiti with emerging and nascent non-paper written text practices such as 'emails and chatroom discussions'. However, because of this lack of co-presence, we might continue to question the extent to which graffiti may be thought of as communication: Although the data show examples of sequentiality, to what extent can graffiti actually be seen as dialogic? Some aspects of graffiti differ from conversation, i.e. lack of co-presence and widespread anonymity; however, toilet graffiti in a university is also influenced by social connections between writers and in general, some structures show obvious parallels with face-to-face conversations, such as adjacency pairs and initiation-response-feedback sequences. Before looking at this question further, we will introduce our methods of data selection, collection and categorisation.

Methodology

Data selection

An investigation of graffiti in *public* toilets proved impractical, as the ones investigated (in Lancaster/Lancashire and Kirklees/West Yorkshire, UK) contained hardly any lexically dense graffiti. This is the result of three factors:

- The surfaces were such that it was very difficult to write on them, i.e. the surface was either laminated or dark in colour, affecting visibility. Some toilets are now designed to resist graffiti, e.g. by means of metallic walls.
- The cleaning and maintenance was very effective, meaning that any graffiti that did occur was often removed very quickly, and before utterance/response chains could form.
- The few public toilets that did attract a lot of graffiti were removed or closed recently by local authorities in accordance with the UK government's recent Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003).

Given these factors, toilet graffiti may be seen as an increasingly ephemeral, if not moribund genre.

The two toilets that were finally investigated were located on two different floors in the Lancaster University library building, in exactly the same location on each floor. The layout of the toilet is important to note and has received attention from a design point of view (see Rez 2002). Here, the layout results in stall A being the first that the individual comes to and as such, fewer people may be likely to use stall B.

Data collection and categorisation

Previous studies have categorised utterances in terms of thematic content; however, this is highly problematic. Wales and Brewer (1976) categorised utterances solely in terms of their theme and did not account for the fact that a chained utterance may actually have more than one theme, for example:

Data sample 3

B (A) LH G-4

Les Ferdinand...Discuss

Black

This example illustrates that if we simply take an utterance and response as one 'graffito unit' (Wales and Brewer 1976: 118) we are avoiding significant factors. In this case the first utterance [^AX] (where ^A = producer and X = utterance) triggers a response, i.e. a second pair part [^BY] (where ^B = producer and Y = response) and gains a categorisation of the aforementioned social actor in terms of skin colour. In light of this problem of attempting to categorise utterance chains as single units in terms of thematic content, a mapping system to categorise utterances in terms of where they appear, in which cubicle and on which wall, seems advisable. This method helps ascertain the turn-taking structures enacted in the data.

Under this system, tiles on the right hand wall of the stall were numbered 1-11 from left to right, and the tiles from the top of the stall to the bottom were lettered A-M. Tiles could be then named by their coordinates, i.e. row (A, B, C...)

followed by column (1, 2, 3...). The utterances on the walls were copied for each tile verbatim, including non-standard spelling, upper and lower case lettering, punctuation, size of letters and words per line, as well as drawings. For the left-hand wall, being a mirror image of the right, the rows (A, B, C...) were labelled as for the right-hand side data; however, the columns were numbered from right to left. This way, the tiles that face each other have the same coordinates on each wall and can be easily differentiated by being labelled either LH (left hand) or RH (right hand). Tiles are listed first by floor (B or C), then by cubicle ((A) or (B)) and wall (RH or LH), and finally by tile coordinates (e.g. G-4). A full coordinate, therefore, would look like this: *B (A) RH G-4*. One pattern to emerge when applying the method was that rather than running from top left, most writing started from the centre of the writer's personal space, i.e. the focal point of the four square tiles in front of him. This lends salience to the first utterance (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: xx) and imposes a particular design upon the available space. Although our focus is not on multimodality or literacy practices, we believe that the proposed method can be fruitfully employed for such studies, e.g. on wall graffiti in urban spaces. For our purposes, such a complex system allows us to see where utterances appeared on the wall in relation to other utterances and thus ascertain sequencing and turn-taking.

Data interpretation: contexts and communities

When interpreting the data, we have to differentiate three levels of context:

- the micro-context of the location (here the toilet stall)
- the meso-context of the university as a public institution, whose collective nature relates to previous studies that proposed that graffiti in toilets reflect

a collective conscience (Stocker et al. 1972; Gonos et al. 1976: 40) or shared beliefs about reality; a defining factor in constructing social groups.

- the socio-cultural macro-context, with the male toilet stall being seen in terms of a community of practice that is embedded in the wider social context, its different social groups and its gender ideologies.

The toilet in a public domain differs fundamentally from a toilet in the private domain. Both the public and the private domain offer a ‘cloak of anonymity’ (Solomon and Yager 1975: 150), but to differing degrees. In a private domain there may be strong social connections between potential discourse participants, whereas in the public domain normally ‘no social connection exists between the writer and reader at all’ (Blume 1985: 141). It is because of the anonymity and lack of social connection between participants in the public domain that participants can usually say ‘whatever, however, and whenever, to whomever’ (Rodriguez and Clair 1999: 2) without fear of compromising their identity. However, the meso-context of the university affords some social connections between writers.

The toilet can be seen as a community of practice (Wenger 1998). This model is important to consider as it addresses group identity, the degree to which the aforementioned social connections exist between discourse participants, and how these factors might affect graffiti. The community of practice is defined by individuals possessing the same accumulated experience, and the actions and reactions we see in toilet graffiti occur not simply as a result of an ‘eruption of the unconscious’ (Gadpaille 1971: 46) but reflect a socially constructed schema of the social practice of writing on a toilet wall.

Engaging in text production in this genre also allows the writer to assure his masculinity vis-à-vis his ‘interlocutors’. Even though the physical environment segregates sex (male/female), the data illustrates that the participants still possess different ideologies and ought to be thought of as ‘multiply membered in various communities of practice’ (Scollon 1998: 13). In the university toilet this is manifested with reference to such aspects as college affiliation, clubs and societies, sports teams:

Data sample 4

B (A) RH D-5:

[^A FURNESS] {A Lancaster University College}

[^B FUK]

Data sample 5

B (A) RH G-9:

[^A THIS PLACE

WASN’T IN

THE FUCKING

PROSPECTUS!]

[^B yes it was – Fylde] {A Lancaster University College}

The examples disprove the idea that there is no social connection at all between writer and reader when it comes to toilet graffiti in a university. Participants do

have knowledge of the audience, but cannot guarantee that their intended audience will be the sole recipient of the text that they have produced. Group membership is not only signalled through individuals identifying with groups outside the toilet stall, but also inside the stalls themselves. The data suggests that physical practices occurring within each stall may also help construct social groups. Practices that one may consider solitary become group practices as a result of many individuals engaging in that practice in the same space, thus making a community of practice. One example of this is masturbation:

Data sample 6

B (B) RH G-8

[^AONE MORE FOR THE WANK TANK!]

[^BThat's BANK you tit]

Here we see that even in the isolation of the toilet stall, masturbation as a solitary practice helps to provide cohesion among writers as it takes place, albeit asynchronously, in the same location, and text producers swap their experiences. At the same time, the toilet stall acquires homoerotic overtones as a joint sexual space. This threat to hegemonic, i.e. heterosexual, masculinity is averted by the stereotypically masculine use of taboo language.

To sum up, we argue that graffiti *texts* are structured by chained utterances and common exchange patterns that to a great extent shape what and how an individual writes. Graffiti *writers* are seen as members of multiple communities of practice, which further shapes the discursive structures we see in the data.

Membership in communities of practice not only affords social connections between individuals but may also lead to a conflict in ideologies as a result of multiple membership and conflicting values between groups.

Discursive Structures

Discussion of the data stems from and develops the perhaps most basic type of exchange; the adjacency pair. This may be defined as a classifiable pair of utterances that are relatively ordered, for example question/answer, greeting/greeting (Sacks 1967: 521). It is important to stress that often the constituents are ordered so that the first part of the utterance shapes the second, for example a question motivates an answer, a greeting triggers a greeting etc. This has implications on the research into graffiti in that the formal patterns we see in male toilet graffiti create a ‘collaborative expectancy’ in the discourse participants (Burke 1962: 58).

To analyse the utterance chains present in the data, we shall use the alphabetical labels suggested by Sacks (1967: 523) to label utterances relative to the order in which they occur, for example:

Data sample 7

C (A) RH E-6

[^A TIME TO DROP ANCHOR

IN POO BAY]



[^B HAHAAHAHA]

The utterances shall be discussed in terms of Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) exchange structure theory, which argues that discursive interaction is built on the primary structure of initiation-response-feedback (the 'IRF sequence'). This theory considers conversation on a more complex level than Sacks. A later revision by Coulthard and Brazil (1981: 97) shows how the initiation component of an exchange may predict the following utterance and how a response can be predicted by the preceding utterance. Although originally developed to describe typical structures of classroom discourse, our data show how this structure can travel across different communicative situations.

The options available to discourse participants are evidenced by the finite number of structures present in the data. The following discussion illustrates the extent to which graffiti adheres to this prototypical exchange structure, and specifically how contextual factors affect the patterns we see. The patterns shall be discussed in terms of utterance and response; while the illocution of an utterance may not be to initiate, it nevertheless inadvertently achieves a response of some kind. The focus then is on five key utterance/response patterns:

i) *Zero response*

[^AX] → [Ø]

B (A) RH G-8:

[^AThe writing

is on

the

wall]

ii) *The utterance/response chain*

[^AX] → [^BY]

[^CY]

[^DY]...

C (A) RH H-9:

[^A WHAT IS THE CRAPPEST

SOCIETY?]

[^B Fencing]

[^C LURPS] {Lancaster University Role Play Society}

[^D “ ”]

iii) *Addition/insertion*

[^AX] → (^B Addition (Pre/Post-modification) or Insertion (infixing)) →

[^BY]

B (A) RH F-7

[^B Subways +

[^A Foo fighters are shit]

At making sandwiches]

iv) *Substitution*

$$[{}^A X] \rightarrow ({}^B \text{ Deletion and Replacement}) \rightarrow [{}^B Y]$$

B (A) RH F- 8

[^AWhat's blue and fucks grannies?

=

~~Hypothermia]~~

[^B papa smurf]

v) *Deletion*

$$[{}^A X] \rightarrow ({}^B \text{ Deletion}) \rightarrow [\emptyset]$$

(see below for examples)

Some notions of conversation analysis, notably sequentiality, suggest both the likelihood of a response and also the possible form this response might take. This likelihood of [^AX] gaining a response seems to depend on the extent to which:

1. The structure of [^AX] inherently demands a response of some sort, i.e. the first pair part shapes the structure of the second in predicting, for example, the second part of an adjacency pair (Sacks 1967: 521). The most common form to be observed in the data is the question and answer sequence, where the producer is often seen to limit the number of possible answers with alternative interrogatives:

Data sample 8

C (A) RH G-8³

[^{A1} HOW MANY WIPES BEFORE YOU WERE CLEAN?]

| 1 - 2 | 3 - 5 | 6 - 10 | 10 - 15 | 16+ |
|-------|-------|--------|---------|-----|
| ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | ✓ | | | |
| | ✓ | | | |

[^{B1/A2} (Dirty fucker)] ←

Other examples may include the use of imperatives as request forms:

Data sample 9

C (A) RH G-7 .

[^A Sign here if you've

got the right to buy your

council house]

[^B I've got the right]

[^E I've got the right!]

[^C I've got the right]

[^D I've got the privilege]

[^F WANKERS]⁴

2. In order to enable communication at all, text producers have to assume that the audience will observe Grice's (1975) maxim of relevance, i.e. that a participant's response will be directly relevant to the preceding utterance (Thomas 1995: 63). So by observing the maxim of relevance,

participants are establishing common themes; the ‘_ Tile’ phenomenon illustrates this:

Data sample 10

B (A) LH I-5

[^A The Ahmed nejadi tile (Iranian President)]

[^B ‘We should wipe Isreal off the map’]

[^C ‘We should move Isreal to Germany’]

[^D ‘The holocaust never happened’]

Participants observe the Gricean maxim of manner,⁵ for example by sharing jokes using question-answer format, and also by ticking in order to signal an agreement or disagreement with [^AX]:

Data sample 11

B (A) RH I-5)

[^A SO

PFA WORLD PLAYER OF THE YR

SHORTLIST IS:

| | | |
|-------|--------|--|
| DINHO | ✓✓✓✓✓✓ | |
| ETO'O | | |
| LAMPS | ✓✓ | |

who do you reckon?]

3. The utterance stirs the reader sufficiently to participate in the act of writing. One method of illustrating the extent to which individuals have been driven to write on the wall might be to look to van Leeuwen's (1996: 66) framework of social actors (as opposed to grammatical actors):

The three categories of actors used here are those that have been named (*nominised*), those 'referred to as groups' (*assimilated*), and those represented as 'unspecified [...] individuals or groups' (*indetermined*) (van Leeuwen 1996: 48, 51). Figure 4 illustrates that the extent to which actors can be identified often corresponds with the form of the response that an utterance achieves.

B (A) RH F-6 (nominised) → Deletion

[^A [deleted] SUX

MONKI BALLS] (sic.)

B (A) RH F-8 (assimilated) → Initiation + Response

[^A TORIES SUCK] ← [^B I AGREE

THATCHER RUINED

THIS COUNTRY]

B (A) RH E-7 (indetermined) → Ø Response

[^A some people have far too much time, or the shifts]

Thus, even in cases where the structure does not demand a response, there are other causal factors that might trigger other contributions to the wall, and also influence the form that the given response takes. In terms of content, it can be observed that mention of assimilated social actors tends to bring about slogan-like responses (14), probably by triggering stereotypes about social groups.

We shall now look at the five discursive structures in turn. As mentioned above, this discussion focuses on conversation/discourse analysis. Where we draw on notions from pragmatics, such as illocutionary force and politeness theory, these should be understood to be relevant to all structures, if most relevant for a particular type of response.

Zero response

As mentioned above, some factors affect the likelihood of [^AX] gaining a response, with some utterances not gaining any response at all (Ø response). Such an unfinished linear structure is shaped not only by context but also by exchange structure norms (i.e. discriminatively ordered pair parts). The following are examples of zero response:

Data sample 15

B (A) RH F-9:

[^ADEATH

TO THE CUNTS
WHO PAINTED
THESE WALLS LAST SUMMER]

Data sample 16

B (B) LH H-4:

[^AStop rape say yes]

What all the examples have in common is that they are declaratives and as such their structures do not inherently require any response from other participants; they are ‘- Predicting’ (Coulthard and Brazil 1981: 97). All signal some kind of evaluation, from the negative evaluation of the social actors in (15) to one individual’s stance on the crime of rape in (16). Beyond that, the misogynistic nature of the two examples re-instantiates hegemonic masculinity as constructed in a hierarchical relation to femininity. However, zero response makes these utterances a unilateral declaration of the writer’s masculinity rather than a discursively achieved identity.

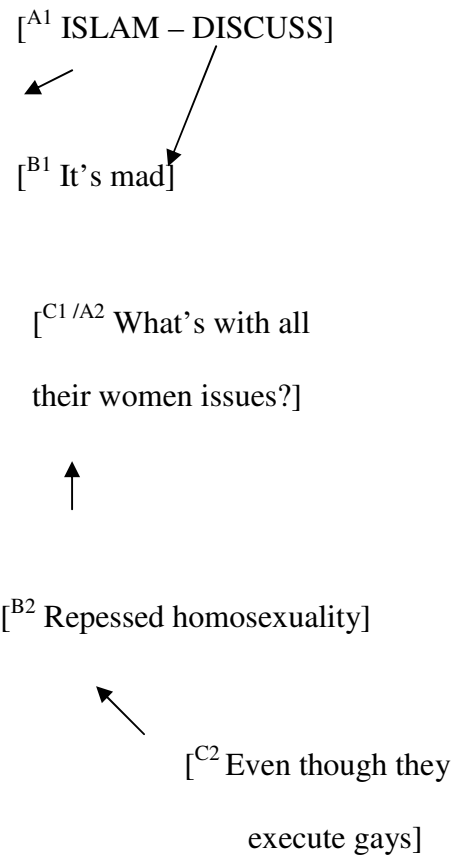
In data sample 15 we see a threat of violence aimed at those who removed utterances from the walls: Given the lack of response, the utterance may be aimed to simply signal the value that a participant wishes to project in this community. This also raises our awareness of the readers, as well as of the mediated nature of this form of discourse.

The utterance/response chain

What constitutes a chain is rather difficult to define simply in terms of utterance [^AX] and response [^BY]. As mentioned above, the relationship between utterance and response may be described in terms of ordered pair parts (question and answer), or in terms of similar thematic content (quotation phenomena) or similar form (jokes). All these features can be set in connection to the Gricean maxims of relation (for pair parts and theme) and manner (for form). One example of an utterance/response chain is the following:

Data sample 17

B (B) RH F-7:



In data sample 17, chaining occurs as a result of the illocution of the producer with the explicit request form: ‘discuss’. The perlocutionary effect here is the incitement to contribute one’s opinion, which increases the likelihood of gaining a response. To explain the example, we must look to IRF sequencing, as the utterance: ‘What’s with all their women issues?’ acts simultaneously as a response (R) to [^{A1}X], and also as an initiator [^{C1/A2} Y/X]. As such, whilst all the responses are related to [^{A1}X], only the first two are direct responses, the third and fourth being responses to [^{C1/A2} Y/X]. The participation is signalled here through the use of arrows explicitly ‘pinpointing’ involvement (Rodriguez and Clair 1999: 5). Utterance chaining thus shows that thematic content not only reflects cultural preoccupations, but also that sequentiality depends on whether or not the response may also serve as initiator. This utterance/response sequence then is perhaps the most basic and fundamental of the sequences found in toilet graffiti, serving as an introduction to other variants.

Addition/insertion

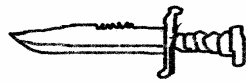
Written language is less ephemeral than spoken language; therefore, male toilet graffiti as a written genre, while showing a conversation-like structure, also features ‘rhetoric [that] is final and unimpeachable’ (McGlynn 1972: 353), at least until the walls are cleaned. As a representational resource, this is enabling in that the utterance can be changed, and the text producer’s illocution taken and adopted/changed by another producer. In this respect, toilet graffiti can be compared to wikis, in which knowledge is generated and disseminated collaboratively through addition to an existing entry. Insertion is a process that occurs as a result of the permanence of utterances and the conflicting ideologies in

this community of practice. The participants have three possibilities for addition/insertion at their disposal: pre-utterance addition, medial-utterance insertion and post-utterance addition.

Data sample 18: pre-utterance addition

C (A) RH F-6

[^B Spam] [^A Daggers are Cool]



Data sample 19: insertion

B (A) RH G-4

[^A WELCOME TO [^B shit

in the] CARTMEL

BAR]

In data sample 18, [^AX] comprises of an illustration (pictorial representation of a dagger) and the declarative, ‘Daggers are cool’. The illustration may serve here as an attention-getter, with an explanatory comment signalling a positive evaluation (i.e. ‘cool’) of the subject in question. However, the utterance here has a statement function, meaning that it does not ask for a specific response. Rather, [^AX] may have been produced to signal a group affiliation or ideology, i.e. the producer is

likely to assume that other members of this community of practice will share the same evaluation.

The response to [^AX] pre-modifies the existing utterance resulting in a semantic shift in subject ('daggers' becomes 'spam daggers'), whilst maintaining the same relational structure ('x is y') and therefore the same evaluation as in [^AX] (i.e. 'are cool'). The conversion by B effectively removes A's illocutionary force, and converts it to suit his own ends, which in this case is done for both the humour of word play, and also to signify to the community of practice an appreciation of the penis – an appreciation the writer assumes this community will share. Another hallmark of hegemonic masculinity, which the text producer can take to be a shared value in the community he is writing for, is the conceptual link between aggression and sexuality as betrayed in data sample 18.

To change participant A's utterance, or in effect remove it from the wall, is potentially face threatening. Goffman (1967: 5) described face as being:

'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes'.

In data sample 18, the process of addition threatens A's negative face (the desire not to be impeded or put upon; see Brown and Levinson 1987: 2). However, the physical context provides the (assumed) anonymity that allows participants to communicate without being restricted by the 'inhibitor of accountability' (Wales and Brewer 1976: 115). The lack of accountability that the context provides thus

allows participant B to preserve his positive face in the process, a feature unique to mediated discourse.

In data sample 19, the producer relies on the audience seeing the utterance as a re-contextualised sign for a college bar, having the perlocutionary effect of identifying ‘Cartmel Bar’ as a toilet. This both signals an opposition to groups that identify themselves with Cartmel College and may also seek support from other individuals that use this particular toilet stall; support is here provided by utterances that echo the theme or form in some way. Following this negative evaluation, however, an insertion ([^Bto shit in the]) foregrounds the conceptualisation of ‘Cartmel Bar’ as a toilet, with the new perlocution of having permission to physically defecate in ‘Cartmel Bar’. Luckily, because the addition of [^BY] is ‘infelicitous’ (Thomas 1995: 36) — the permission is granted by a person who is not authorised to do so —, it is unlikely to translate into action.

The example of post-utterance addition is slightly more complex in structure than the previous two in that there is *chaining* following the modification:

Data sample 20:post-utterance addition

B (A) RH E-4

[^A FYLDE F.C]

[^B ARE

SHIT] [^C HOT]

Here, there is an assertion made in [^AX], with the illocution signalling identification with a college football team. [^BY] contributes a negative evaluation

of the group in question, denigrating the identity of the other and consequently ameliorating in-group identity. In a similar way to data sample 18, the process of insertion here threatens A's negative face, and the second addition serves to maintain A's positive face, shifting this negative evaluation by the addition of 'hot', which changes 'shit' to an intensifier in 'shit hot'. As such then, there is support for [^AX] in [^CY] and we can see how a community of practice seeks to maintain positive face. Although it is impossible to tell whether or not [^CY] was written by the same participant as [^AX], the example still illustrates how group identity may be influenced by social connections and the notion of face.

Whether or not a process occurs in initial, medial or final position is perhaps linked to the subject-verb-object structure of English. This order means that, should an insertion/addition take place, we can predict that the actor and goal may prototypically be modified with pre-utterance addition and post-utterance addition, respectively, and that the process they are involved in may be modified by a medial insertion. Thus, insertion/addition processes are made possible through the grammatical structure of English, the permanence afforded by writing and the anonymity of the physical micro-context. However, the process may also stem from the simple fact of the limited space on the wall.

Substitution

The process of substitution shares some characteristics with insertion/addition, although the insertion takes place on the pretext that part of an utterance has been removed first. The deletion is generally signalled by a crossing out, often leaving the deleted part of [^AX] partially visible. Similar to addition/insertion, substitution

results in the maintenance of co-text and thus in a direct and equal shift in either the subject, object or strength and type of evaluation of [^AX]:

Data sample 21

B (A) RH G-7

[^A What's the difference b/w

[^B racist twat]

A ~~dead black~~ man, and a dead

Racoon; if each are lying on the
side of the road?

There's skid marks in front
of the racoon]

Substitution here involves a change in role allocation, shifting the [^AX] 'dead black man' to [^BY] 'racist twat' (sic). The shift here occurs as a result of the thematic content of [^AX], in that it is overtly racist in implying that the life of a black person (a categorised social actor) is worth less than an animal's. The assumption is then that there is a 'community of ideology' (Fowler 1985: 66) within this community of practice, in that production is oriented to an audience assumed to have the same values as A. However, the response signals multiple communities of ideology, namely a binary opposition of those who are racist and those who are not.

As mentioned previously, the change in an utterance consequently shifts illocutionary force; however, the fact that the relevant part of [^AX] is only partially

obscured means that recipients can read both [^AX] and [^BY] simultaneously. As a result of this participant B allows others in their community of ideology to witness the motivation behind the action that was taken. Other studies have claimed that utterances that are intended to marginalise in some way often help to maintain the status quo (Bruner and Kelso 1980: 250; Rodriguez and Clair 1999: 1). In this case the partial visibility allows both communities of ideology to witness the initiation and response. However, the hostile response may result in those identifying with speaker A as feeling marginalised themselves, and as such the hostile ideology that we see in [^AX] is mirrored (although with an opposing perspective) by [^BY], and may have wider social effects on the inter-group relationship between those identifying with group A and those with group B outside of the toilet stall.

Deletion

Having outlined how participants may change an utterance, we shall now discuss the cases where utterances are deleted and no alternative is added/inserted. The data only contain two examples:

Data sample 23

C (A) RH D-8

[^A The person you most want to
be having this shit on?]
[^B *A French Person]
(^C **smudged over*)

[^D (Another French person)]

Data sample 24

B (A) RH F-6

[^A (^Bdeleted) SUX

MONKI BALLS]

What both the above examples have in common is that the social actors in each case were originally included. Not only that, but they have been nominised (presumably named in ‘_ sux monki balls’) and categorised in ‘a French person’ (see van Leeuwen 1996: 66). It is in such a case that the physical context is the major influencing factor on what is written in [^AX] and also in response [^BY]. Deletion is the most weighted response a participant may make, with an increased probability of deletion should the actor be named or categorised (see Figure 4).

If an individual names another and gives a negative evaluation of some kind, then the addressee’s positive face is threatened. However, the notion of communication being defective, i.e. a person mostly responding without knowing to whom they are responding (Blume 1985: 142), implies that there may be two frames in which we may think of face. The first frame is the face a person ascribes to themselves in the *external* meso-level context (i.e. face-to-face relationships in the university), and the second in this *internal* micro-context (anonymous relationships in the toilets). It is only when the goal of an utterance is known and named for others to see that face on a meso-level is threatened, i.e. the name signals an external referent, and may thus allow people to identify publicly the

individual in question. Therefore, by nomination, one allows an utterance to threaten face both in the micro and meso-level communities of practice, whereas other utterances affect face solely on the micro-level.

In light of the above, it is possible to see wider implications of the characteristics of toilet graffiti as a genre. Research has asserted that graffiti is 'equal opportunity rhetoric' (Rodriguez and Clair 1999: 3), in the sense that the context allows participants to say whatever to whomever. Yet, if an individual is named, the genre is far removed from equal opportunity, restricting the goal of [X] in the options for retaliation. Perhaps the reason why studies often find hostile graffiti towards other communities of practice is because although groups themselves may be known, the individuals that constitute them are not, thus allowing face threats to occur without redress when the goal of an utterance is a group, or assimilated social actors. However, in a relatively tightly knit community such as a university, anonymity may not always be granted, thereby restricting what is permissible in the context.

Conclusions

By conceiving of graffiti as discourse, and analysing the data using frameworks borrowed from conversation analysis and discourse studies, we demonstrated that graffiti texts shows five main typical structures: zero response, utterance/response chains, addition/insertion, substitution and deletion. The defective, largely anonymous communication seen in toilet graffiti is a direct result of the micro-level or physical context, i.e. the toilet stall. Isolation and subsequent anonymity makes toilet graffiti distinct from other genres in as far as participants mostly do not know the producers or audiences of a text. Anonymity does play a key role in

the types of response we see and also the fact that face threats occur without redress. However, the participants are not entirely anonymous in a university toilet as they are members of a community of practice, defined by group affiliations within the university. The social connections formed by these communities of practice and subsequent conflicting values have implications on exchange structure in the data, in that the processes might be linked to the degree of personalisation that occurs in [X]; a direct result of influence from the meso-level context, in that individuals are trying to maintain positive and negative face just as in face-to-face interaction.

The theme of an utterance and its form are results of participants observing the Gricean maxims (1975) of manner and relevance. This highlights the fact that topic preoccupation is not simply a result of dominant values in the different contexts, but also of adhering to conversational norms, which illustrates the extent to which this written form might be seen as quasi-spoken, or dialogic.

It was also established that micro, meso and macro-contexts create different influences on both textual strategies and the members of communities of practice who employ them. Thus, the meso-context of the university, for example, determines social connections that exist before entering the stall's community of practice, signalling the need to think of writers in terms of multiple community membership. The social macro-context similarly sees writers as members of particular social groups (defined by ethnicity, sexuality, gender etc.). As a result, we have conflicting ideologies in the micro-context of the toilet stall. However, these conflicts are counter-balanced by the group cohesion provided by the construction of masculine identity in the texts.

Graffiti in toilets (micro-context) then provides a site of engagement for members of various outside communities of practice (meso-context). Influencing factors in the macro-context such as social group membership and gendered identities also require consideration when analysing data from toilets. A research paradigm that combines a conversation analytical focus on texts structures with an ethnographic and discourse analytical approach to text producers (cf. Coates 2003) grants insights into how the form and structure graffiti takes reflect the society in which it is written.

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Notes

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² See method section for the categorisation of examples.

³ Despite the less than academic content of the graffito, its chart form is reminiscent of academic text types and thus reflects the university context.

⁴ Similar to other hybrid genres such as texting or email, size of letters is here used to imitate volume of speech and hence emotion.

⁵ Due to the physical limitation of space on the wall, the maxim of quantity is manifested in processes such as the addition/insertion (see below).